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OFFICIALS

SUBJECT: CROWN PRINCE OUTLINES REGIONAL CHALLENGES WITH
GENERAL ABIZAID

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) CENTCOM Commander General Abizaid October 11 met with Crown Prince Shaikh Salman and discussed Iraq, Iran, the war of ideas in the Middle East, and Bahrain's upcoming elections. On Iraq, the CP said that the United States should adopt a "less forward-leaning position" and allow Iraqi forces to take the front lines. This could have several beneficial effects, including shoring up support in the United States for continued military engagement in Iraq. Turning to Iran, the CP recommended there be a robust demonstration of resolve, capability, and duty by the U.S. and its allies in the region. He suggested the U.S. and GCC hold an exercise like Bright Star to send a message to Iran. Stressing that the diplomatic track was by far preferable, the CP said that if it comes to war with Iran, the goal must be to defeat them and force the government to surrender. There should be no talk of liberating the people or nation-building. The biggest long-term challenge facing the region is a war of ideas, with the forces of moderation confronting extremism. He offered his broad policy prescriptions for winning this struggle. The CP said that good things were happening in Bahrain in the run-up to parliamentary and municipal elections in November. End Summary.

Put Iraqis on the Front Lines

¶2. (C) CENTCOM Commander General Abizaid and delegation October 11 met with Crown Prince Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa over a Ramadan iftar and discussed Iraq, Iran, the war of ideas in the Middle East, and Bahraini elections. Defense Minister General Shaikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa participated in the meeting. The CP said that he had seen Iraqi President Talibani and Ambassador Khalilzad at an Aspen Institute event he had attended in September. He said it was clear that Talbani's mission had been to present reasons to ensure that American forces remain in Iraq.

¶3. (C) In the CP's view, however, the United States should pull back to a "less forward-leaning position" in Iraq. This would have multiple benefits: it could result in (a) shoring up public support in the United States for continued military engagement in Iraq; (b) forcing the Iraqis to take more responsibility for their own security; and (c) putting the GOI into the position of having to request assistance from its Arab neighbors - not Iran - something it had not yet done. In this regard, he recommended that PM Maliki visit

key regional Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to develop relationships with their leaders. It could be useful for Ambassador Khalilzad to accompany Maliki on these visits. GEN Abizaaid stated that the level of violence between various groups and militias in Iraq is high. The CP agreed, saying that the primary challenges facing the Iraq government are security, federalism, oil, and external relations.

Military Exercise to Send Signal to Iran

¶4. (C) Turning to Iran, Shaikh Salman said that Iranian leaders believe they have a mission "greater than themselves." They are arrogant in their perception of the country's civilization, culture, and history. There should be a "robust demonstration of resolve, capability, and duty" by the U.S. and its allies in the region to deter, contain, and prevent Iran. Iran may believe that the U.S. is mired in Iraq, but regional unity and cooperation can persuade Iran otherwise. The CP suggested that the United States consider holding an exercise like Bright Star with the GCC in the Gulf. He understands that Saudi Arabia may be interested in participating in something like this. A Bright Star-type exercise would send the right signal to Iran. Even if the entire GCC does not sign on, Bahrain would participate. NAVCENT VADM Walsh suggested that a maritime exercise could be the best way to begin and noted that NAVCENT and Bahraini naval officers would meet soon to discuss the nature of Bahraini participation in Combined Task Force-150 and 152. The CP commented that if Bahrain joins one of the task forces, other GCC countries would be interested in participating also.

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¶5. (C) The Crown Prince recommended that the United States sit down with Iran, even as an observer at multi-party talks. However, if diplomatic efforts did not succeed and there is to be war, the goal must be to defeat Iran. Do not say you are coming to "liberate" the people, he advised, or engage in nation-building. Rather, the goal must be to defeat them and force the government to surrender. It would be dangerous to assume that Iran would change its behavior in reaction to a limited strike. Looking closer to home, Shaikh Salman said that Bahrain would be on the front lines in the case of war with Iran. The GOB needs to understand better the possible impact of a conflict with Iran on Bahraini society. While military planning is important, there needs to be a wider ranging assessment, considering such issues as possible nuclear contamination of Gulf waters.

Prescriptions for The War of Ideas

¶6. (C) Shaikh Salman said that the biggest long-term challenge in the region is ideological. The region is facing a struggle of ideas. One idea, religious extremism, is linked to religion and the after-life. The other, democracy, is "dirty, earthy, and secular." Given this dynamic, is it easy to see why the forces of moderation are under pressure. The Israel-Palestinian conflict, "the meta-banner over the battlefield," provides fodder for the extremists. The CP expressed his view that Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa's presentation to the UN Security Council on the Arab initiative on the Palestinian conflict had gone well. Noting that Shaikh Khalid had recently visited Palestinian President Abbas, Shaikh Salman said "we are leaning forward with the Israelis while others lean back."

¶7. (C) The Crown Prince offered his "broad prescriptions" for winning the war of ideas in the region. First, he recommended that the U.S. soften some of its political reform agenda. This would be viewed favorably by key regional

actors - Saudi Arabia and Egypt - and generate support for US. diplomatic efforts addressing other issues. The larger issue of democracy will survive in the long term. Second, he said that all parties must recognize that Iraq is not a model for democracy in the Middle East. It was critical that the U.S. pull its forces back from the front lines while the Iraqis step up. This transition period could be violent and unstable, but it is necessary.

Focus on Moderates vs. Extremists

¶18. (C) The CP's third prescription is that the territorial integrity of Iraq must be preserved. This is the main thing, he said. He recalled that Iranian President Ahmadinejad had told him a year ago that it was in Iran's interest that there be a weak government in Iraq. Ahmadinejad, the CP said, is an "enemy of progress" in Iraq. Finally, he said that if moderates cannot deliver peace and prosperity, they will be viewed as U.S. or Western collaborators without credibility. The extremists would benefit from this perception. Many people are now focusing on sectarian violence. This is a terrible phenomenon, but "it could end in minutes." Sunni and Shia can cooperate when it is in their interest to do so, citing Hamas and Hezbollah as an example. The real issue is ideological, the moderates versus the extremists, and this is where the U.S. should focus its attention.

¶19. (C) Tactically, the Crown Prince said, we may be winning the fight against extremists, but we are losing the strategic war of ideologies. "We need a better idea" to present to people, he stated. In terms of fighting terrorists, he thought that Saudi Arabia was now doing a better job. "On 9-11, Saudi Arabia was asleep. With the May (2004) attacks (in Khobar), it woke up. This past year, it is now starting to get out of bed," he said.

Broad Support for Political Reform

¶10. (C) In response to GEN Abizaid's question, the CP said that good things were happening in Bahrain in the run-up to the November parliamentary and municipal elections. There had been a general expectation that sectarian tensions in Iraq could spill over into Bahrain during the election period. But so far things were going well and he is

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confident of a decent election. He noted that King Hamad had met with both Sunni and Shia clerics about the elections. All are very supportive of the political reform process in the country, and the CP pledged that it will continue.

¶11. (U) GEN Abizaid cleared this cable.

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